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SOME REMARKS UPON MODERN TENDENCIES IN ART

The subject of these remarks is one of those delightfully inconsequential topics upon which one may ponder seriously or frivolously without danger of reaching any very important conclusions. The indulgence of the reader is therefore sought in his perusal of these fugitive impressions, hastily brought together in an attempt to survey a few of the more conspicuous trends of modern art.

Whether it be in the field of pictorial expression, sculpture, architecture, literature or music, modern art is revolutionary. Many opposing voices have, of course, been raised against it, and such able critics as Kenyon Cox and Irving Babbitt are not lacking with vigorous protests and zealous preachments of reaction to the standards of the classical spirit. Yet the fact remains that to be modern is to be in some way different, and this impulse to found new standards and to propagate new ideas and theories can be dismissed neither as the chimerical dream of a too impulsive youth, nor as the degenerate fancy of a diseased mind. As mad as are many of the products which call themselves works of art, they are far too numerous, too diverse in subject and too widespread in appeal, to be regarded as either sporadic or fortuitous. If they are symptomatic of mental disease, it is a disease which more or less affects us all.

The reader will, of course, think at once of the trend in pictorial art which emanated from the impressionism of Manet and Monet, and has proceeded through the expressionism of Dégas, and the post-impressionism of Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin, to the ultra-modern vagaries of the Cubists and Futurists. But before considering these phenomena let us first see how this same tendency is making itself increasingly manifest in the other arts. It is not merely a new painting and a new sculpture which modern thought is inventing, but we have also a new drama, as revealed in the plays of John M. Synge and his congeners; a new poetry in the astounding narratives of John

Masefield; while, with respect to music, the toxic effects of Wagner have led onward to the cacophony of Strauss, Debussy, and Stravinsky. And the whole movement is so teeming with life and vigor that one must indeed be self-opinionated who dares to question its sincerity.

Yet the movement is difficult to comprehend, and it is equally difficult to know whither it is leading. Even the artists themselves are uncertain. A fever is on them, and what they do, they know not. Is it then, after all, a disease,—this modernity?

We may answer both yes and no. Certainly, it is a disease in the literal meaning of the word: a dissatisfaction with the ancient forms of expression, and a reaching out after new terms and new modes to give vent to thoughts which cannot find an adequate expression in the old habitual patterns. With usage every mode of expression tends to become an arbitrary and mechanical device, answering well enough for the commonplace and the trivial, but showing its bare makeshift construction whenever it must needs serve to convey a new thought. And new thoughts abound these days: new thoughts of every imaginable sort,—sociological thoughts, economic thoughts, thoughts of morality and religion, of art and philosophy. We require a new language, and our disease is indicative of this.

On the other hand, modernity is not altogether pathological. In striving after a mode to carry our thoughts further, it is necessary that we should expand our means of communication. Though at first the medium is strange and misunderstood we may perchance learn it, if only its linguistic foundations are rational. In itself the tendency is not unhealthful, although it verges readily upon morbidity and the bizarre, for it is the lack of organization in ideas, and the incapacity to give complete expression to desire, which constitute the functional disorders of mind. Hence it is not strange that modern utterances should be in part mad and in part sane.

One of the powerful leaders in inaugurating the modern movement for more complete expression in painting was the Dutchman, Vincent Van Gogh, and the fact that he became insane and finally took his own life is often cited. One who could send his ear as a love-token to his sweetheart is, no doubt, a symbolist of

peculiar qualities. Yet there is much significance in the following passage taken from one of his recently published letters.—It is the artist's description of a portrait which he would paint:—

“Let us imagine him a fair man. All the love I feel for him I should like to reveal in my painting of the picture. To begin with, then, I paint him just as he is, as faithfully as possible. Still, this is only the beginning; the picture is by no means finished at this stage. Now I begin to apply the color arbitrarily. I exaggerate the tone of his fair hair; I take orange, chrome and dull lemon-yellow. Behind his head, instead of the trivial wall of the room, I paint infinity. I make a simple background out of the richest of blues, as strong as my palette will allow, and thus, owing to this simple combination, this fair and luminous head has the mysterious effect upon the rich blue background of a star suspended in dark ether.”

Could anything be clearer than the desire of this mad genius for a complete expression of his thought and feeling? He wished to paint infinity. Impossible? But why? May we not have a pictorial symbol as clearly expressive of infinity as is the rectangular form which serves for a house, or the horizontal line which suggests the horizon? Yet how close are sanity and insanity brought together in the expression of such desires. A recent writer on the Post-Impressionists, a Japanese artist, Yoshio Markino, has classified the modern painters as belonging to five types: the humbug, the degenerate, the lunatic, the eccentric, and the genius. No doubt, the modern movement embraces them all, yet the author at least has the grace to note that genius is also of this company, for genius must forever shun the reactionary tendency of those who do as others do. It costs something to be a genius, yet without genius art is dead.

What, then, is the philosophy which underlies this movement? So general an expression must have its philosophy, for the *Zeitgeist* is evident in all its modes of expression, definite and indefinite, significant and vague. If, in view of the confusion and self-contradiction which are prevailing notes in all human behavior, it is too much to expect that any single philosophic creed should underlie these diverse artistic efforts of the modern spirit, still, it is by resemblance rather than by differences that

we are able to explain things. And, despite all differences, a resemblance is apparent in these works, however diverse their nature. This fundamental resemblance I would call *realism*, in its modern philosophical meaning; realism as opposed to idealism, and meaning the acceptance of entities independent of the personal mind. Idealism, on the contrary, maintains that all truths are perceived truths, and that the perceiver is their originator.

We need go no farther on this metaphysical excursion, but it is important to grasp this distinction before one attempts to understand the trend of modern art. Since we live in a realistic age, it is the philosophy of realism which lies at the root of our artistic as well as of all our other fundamental impulses. The classical tradition, on the other hand, was born of an idealistic age, and its foundations were laid upon another philosophy. Having altered our philosophy of life, we find the old forms of idealistic expression less pertinent and less satisfying to modern desire, but since the new philosophy is yet in its infancy, the new forms are still imperfect and we comprehend them only with difficulty.

What has idealism done for art? It has stressed the fanciful and the imaginative. It has found the source of art in the mind. Artistic ideas were, therefore, the ideals toward which all minds were expected to strive, and perfection was the goal. The ideal form, the ideal situation, the ideal truth: these were the things sought for; but alas, they have all been found! So long as we follow this will-o'-the-wisp, we but ring changes on the thoughts which have been many times thought, and the utterances which have been many times uttered.

It is not out of man's inner consciousness that new truths are discovered. Think of the ages during which the flatness of the earth was an undisputed fact for the common herd, and the geocentric conception of Ptolemy was the ultimate philosophy of the wise man! How did Copernicus rectify this view? Not by his imagination, but by recourse to facts. This is realism, and we find the same experimentation going on in art to-day. The modern artist is no longer content to retire to his inner consciousness and evolve an ideal head or an ideal landscape. He

goes to nature instead and looks upon her with a cool, unprejudiced eye which discovers for him new truths where they were least suspected. Not nature alone does he seek, for naturalism is but one subordinate form of realism, which embraces the material world in its circumstantial aspects, and also the world of spiritual truths, so far as they bear the implications of reality. Thus, much of modern art is highly symbolic and abstract. Reality and actuality are not synonymous terms, yet each is subject to an artistic treatment which modernism prescribes. That which is *actual* is immediately apprehended, such as a color or a sound, but that which is *real* may be much more subtle, as is the ether, let us say. The philosophy of realism, then, embraces both the things immediately given through the senses, and likewise the things which one must postulate in connection with and in support of the things that are given. Thus the realist in art may depict not only what he sees in a frank, unbiased *coup d'œil*, but likewise the things that he knows, though he cannot see them. Hence, his symbolism and his abstractness.

The same realistic tendency is manifest in the 'new poetry' of such a writer as Masefield, when he depicts the spiritual awakening of a grossly blunted sensibility in his poem entitled *The Everlasting Mercy*, or when he describes conflicts of human passion in his other narrative poems: *Dauber*, *The Widow in the Bye Street* and *The Daffodil Fields*. Not man's ideals nor a mere transcription of perceived events, but the realities themselves have been the source of his poetic inspiration.

Again, one finds realism in the quaintly suggestive and poetic fancies which John M. Synge has wrought out of his poteen-drinking and crudely immoral Irishmen. One does not wonder that the Irish nationalists refused to accept *The Playboy of the Western World* as a true delineation of their national characteristics. We should be equally loath to have the worse side of our natures thrown up in high relief. And yet, to my small knowledge, the artistic possibilities of human kind, irrespective of its ideal purpose, have never been more clearly brought forth than in the four small volumes of plays which John M. Synge has bequeathed us.

Finally, in music, the most abstract of the arts, progress in realism, though beset with difficulties, has been positive and highly significant. Because music is nothing more than music it is not a language of concrete thought, and its expressions demand no concrete interpretation. Yet evidences of realistic aim are not wanting even in this field. Strauss with his *Domestic Symphony* and *Ein Helden Leben*, and the Russian composer Moussorgsky, with his children's scenes, may be mentioned as typifying one aspect of this tendency. The future of programme-music is uncertain, but there can be no doubt that the impulse to depict more or less concrete experiences in musical terms has been very stimulating to musical invention. And in some efforts at least,—as, for instance, the composition for a string quartette by the Bohemian composer Smetana entitled *Aus Meinen Leben*, in which he depicts his artistic career, with the subsequent deafness which overtook him,—a very high degree of artistic perfection has been achieved. Other aspects of modern music, as one finds them in the compositions of Debussy and in the programmes of the Italian futurists, are more subtle in their realistic implications; for they aim not merely at description in musical terms, but also at realities of a purely tonal and rhythmic order which have previously been overlooked or discarded by prejudiced conventions. The enlargement of the scale, and the enrichment of polyphonic and rhythmic effects are distinctly realistic and may be justified upon purely rational grounds.

Turning finally to the vagaries of Cubism and Futurism, I must confess a greater reluctance in admitting these works to the group of modern expressions which seem to have real and abiding worth. Frankly, I am unable to understand them, and I suspect a large measure of charlatanry and insincerity in much that has been offered by these schools. Yet I try to keep my mind open, awaiting further light on the subject.

Cubism seems to be an effort to express movement and to emphasize essential form, while a decorative color-scheme vivifies the portrayal and thus renders it abstractly interesting. What is lacking, to my eyes, is the synthesis which brings these diverse factors together into a unified whole.

It has been suggested, in connection with the now famous "Nude Man Descending a Staircase", by Marcel Duchamp, that if in looking at it one can wink the eyes with sufficient rapidity the figure will assemble its scattered members and proceed to walk down the stairs. I have tried the experiment, but with no great success. I fear that I am unable to wink rapidly enough to meet the cinematic demands of the case, which would be at least fifteen winks to the second. I do fancy, however, that the artist had some such notion of the blurred successive views of a moving figure when he planned his picture. But that movement can be thus depicted or even symbolized in any satisfactory manner upon a flat and unmoving surface is beyond my comprehension.

The lozenge-shaped forms into which Picasso and others manage to dissolve the human figure are also irritating to my understanding. Yet again I fancy that the artist is trying to give us that pristine effect of a total view without definite concentration, which catches only the patches of color and value without going forward to a complete perception of their significant relationships.

The emphasis upon straightness at the expense of curves is apparently but an outgrowth of that common usage of the studios which aims to stress the essential features by a blocking-out process. The reader will recall in this connection the studio casts which are made with straight edges and flat surfaces to accentuate significant details.

As distinct from Cubism, Futurism is not merely an art,—it is also a philosophy, and it finds expression in music and poetry as well as in painting. Its acknowledged leader, M. Marinetti, is an Italian by descent, an Egyptian by birth, and a Frenchman by choice. Futurism as a philosophy is the antithesis of effetism. Whatever is new, is commendable. Commercial progress is the greatest thing in the modern world. Therefore it is the thing which most demands artistic expression. On the canvases of these painters we find symbolic representations of labor strikes and speeding trains, but also things which are to me much more obscure, since they seem to aim at a series of dissolving views all presented at one time.

"The indefinite physiological and intellectual progress of mankind" is said to be their programme. The use of the adjective *indefinite*, with its double meaning, is perhaps significant. At least, for myself, I find the futurist's aims indefinite in the sense of being obscure rather than in the sense of being 'progressive'.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that the world is undergoing revolution, and that the philosophy of the present which underlies all our endeavors is more and more strongly tinged with realism, less and less restrained by the cool formulation of an ideal. On the whole, we must be ready, therefore, to accept the newer expressions of art as a sincere attempt to find a more adequate means of expression through the creation of a new language of dynamic form. But we should also remember that, lacking as yet a firm foundation, modern art is subject to many mad vagaries which are the natural consequence of our diseased state. Half-formed truths work much mischief, and those who can see but one narrow aspect of a situation often but obscure the jewel of art in a too laborious effort to express the insignificant. We are assisting in a pioneer movement whose results are still meagre and unsatisfying to the appetite. I can close this paper no more fittingly than by quoting a quaint sentence of the Japanese writer already mentioned: "Though they may be most delicious," he says, "the breakfast dishes cannot be served on the dinner table."